Reflections of Work

Growing up I had no idea that I would one day be in a fifth grade classroom teaching social studies and language arts. It was always my desire to become a teacher, but a social studies teacher was never in the works. I never enjoyed social studies as a student. I always felt that it was something that was purely memorization and factual knowledge. My perceptions of this subject changed, however, as I began student teaching my last year of school. I was placed in a classroom where social studies, more specifically American History post Civil War, was the main focus. I loved learning about this time period. It was fascinating to see how the past still connected to the present and even to the future. One year into teaching, I knew I needed help. While I loved teaching social studies, I knew I still need some way to convey my new found passion on to my students in a format that was unlike any I had ever seen. This is when I learned about the Teaching American History in South Carolina class. I knew that this was what I needed to help me become a better teacher.

During the weeks of the institute I learned so much from the lectures. I was able to learn background knowledge that I did not have before. This helped me better understand the subject that I was teaching. It also instilled the desire to learn more information other than what was in my textbook so that I could continue becoming a better teacher to my students. Many times I felt inadequate compared to the experienced teachers there. Although I had these feelings, I am glad that I was able to learn from them and take away something new, if not only for my personal knowledge.
In addition to factual knowledge, I also gained a plethora of resources to take back to the classroom. All of those that were involved in the institute were so helpful. I could not believe that all this time there were so many people waiting and willing to pass on their knowledge and talents. I received handout after handout of things that could be modified and adapted to meet the needs of my classroom. While many of the things focused on high school subjects, I still felt that I was gaining tools that would better me and, in return, better my students. For example, I have already used the forms that help students analyze primary resources in my classroom. I used these when my students were looking at some maps I had put up around the room. Since my students were still new at analyzing primary documents, I knew it would be helpful to give them a tool that would help them remain focused. These pages were great. Not only did they help my students dig deeper, but it also helped them have something tangible in their hands when we were discussing the maps as a class, later on. Another activity that I plan on using in my classroom is the mass production “hot-air balloon” lesson we did in class the day we took the train ride. I loved the activity and plan on using it within the next couple of weeks to help my students understand the concept of mass reproduction. I was so grateful for the master teacher sessions. I feel that this is where I received the most help to better my classroom instruction through teaching methods.

In addition to the lectures and the master teacher sessions, the cultural institutions were also energizing. I enjoyed all the places we went. The two that I felt helped me the most, however, were the train station and the trip to the Kensington Mansion and schoolhouse. I felt that these two days really put me in a place that helped me see some South Carolina resources for my students. The mansion would be a great place for my
students to visit at the beginning of the year. I know that my students do not grasp the
size or the idea of a plantation, and I feel that this would better help them understand. I
also loved the fact that they would be able to take a look at a sharecropping contract and
look at maps of the plantation and how the land was plotted during Reconstruction. This
year my students and I looked at an agreement between a plantation owner and a
sharecropper. They were shocked at how little rights the sharecropper had. I only
wished that we could have enhanced this by going to the mansion this year. I also feel
that it would be of great benefit for my students to go to the train station. While
researching for my lessons, I learned a great deal about the South Carolina Railroads. I
tried to pass some of this knowledge on to my students. I can only imagine how much
more effective it would be if the students could have been to the rails in Winnsboro, or
even, possibly, ridden on the train. I definitely think this would have improved their
advertisements. While time did not allow for this, this year, I hope to make plans for it in
the future.

I truly feel that this institute has helped improve my teaching this year. I have
used many more primary resources in my teaching. I learned that you really do not have
to come up with a complex lesson to integrate something into your lesson to make it more
meaningful. This year I used a testimony from a former slave. He testified in court about
how the slaves were treated after the end of the Civil War. My students became so
outraged by the behavior. I feel that this was more effective than anything I could have
taught them, because they read first hand how the African American race was treated.
No longer did they need to take my word for it. Soon after, one of my students brought
in an old photograph of one of her deceased relatives that was a slave. It was moving to
see these students get so involved. I even began to see a difference in their journal
writing.

Would I say that this experience has been a piece of cake? Oh, absolutely not. It
has been a battle trying to incorporate these things, at times. There were days when I
could not find the idea I was looking for, or my idea for a lesson would just not come
together; however, eventually, everything worked out just fine. The end result has been
worth it. I have seen my students change their opinion of social studies and really
become involved in their learning. I do not feel that I have moved mountains, but I do
feel that I can walk away this year knowing that I instilled a little smidgeon of good taste
for social studies in my students’ mouths. That, to me, made this whole class worth more
than any class I have taken in my college career.